

## **Lesson to political parties: here is the method for really listening to citizens**

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Political parties in Italy are in crisis. They face low voter turnout in the recent local elections, low levels of trust from voters, and official efforts on the part of the current government to reassess the whole framework within which they operate. As part of this effort, Giuliano Amato has proposed to re-examine the channels of communication between citizens and parties, and to develop innovative approaches to citizen involvement. Instead of just gazebos where people can sign up, he offers as an example the Deliberative Poll held in the Regione Lazio which included discussion of the number of hospital beds and possible alternative forms of medical care. As Amato said, “If you ask a citizen if you should cut the number of beds, he will tend to say no. But when at the end of discussion he realizes that the beds cost a lot, and it can be convenient to replace the hospital with day hospital, the orientation changes”. In a Deliberative Poll, such as the one held in Lazio in 2006, a scientific sample of voters is recruited as with an ordinary poll, but then it is actually brought together to discuss the issues. There are moderated small group discussions, balanced briefing materials, questions to competing experts. These views are then registered in confidential questionnaires and the resulting changes in opinion are often large. The process shows what the public would think about an issue if it could consider it under good conditions, weigh competing arguments and become more informed. Because the samples are scientific random samples, they represent the whole population of voters not just a self-selected group that has been mobilized to turn up.

Deliberative Polls have been used at the local level in Italy, in Torino and in Lazio, and they have even been used twice at the pan-European level for the entire European Union. A national sample is cost effective because, as a matter of statistics, one does not need a larger sample to represent a larger population. So, the proposal is a practical one for large populations as well as for one small ones.

How could such a processes help political parties, both at the national and the local level?

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First, parties could consult the public about the issues—to clarify elements of a party platform before elections or contested party decisions between one election and another (whose results would represent a very important information to take into consideration if then the parties decided to consult *all* their voters about the same issue). In doing so, parties would better understand, not just the angry or mobilized voices that come to public meetings, but the views of all the people, after they have had a chance to think and discuss the issues. Such a process reconnects voters with the parties by allowing the parties to really address the voters' substantive concerns and discomfort. The reform of the labor market is, for example, an issue on which parties could consult the citizens.

Second, parties could use such a process to select its candidate for coalition primaries. It gives the thoughtful and representative endorsement of a candidate for the coalition primary. The sample could be of all voters or it could be restricted to party members. This solution avoids the need to organize primaries in sequence, the ones inside the parties and the one within the coalition. When parties consult the people, it increases their transparency and legitimacy, both of which are needed by parties if they are to meet the challenge of governing.

Third, in those cases in which it is not possible to hold primaries, parties could use deliberative polls to evaluate candidates for elections. In Greece, one of the two major parties PASOK, used the process to select a candidate for mayor in the Athens suburb of Marousi in 2006. A scientific sample met for a day, questioned the candidates face to face, filled out extensive questionnaires and then actually voted by secret ballot to determine the candidate.

If the Italian Government thinks that there is to be a real national dialogue about the role of parties in Italian politics, then a national Deliberative Poll on that subject with the sample of all Italian citizens could help shape the alternatives and clarify what changes in the system the people would recommend and support—when they think about it. The subject is complicated but in about 70 Deliberative Polls held around the world, we see that the people can deal with complicated issues—if they grapple with them under good conditions for discussion and getting information.

In the spirit of Article 49 of the Italian constitution, why not really make parties “the tools by which citizens contribute to national politics”? Why not encourage parties (and governments) to listen to the people—for issues, for candidates and for how to change the system itself? Would it not be easier for parties to regain the

trust of voters if they used public funding also to involve citizens in their decisions?